



FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER PUBLICATION NO. 13

SECRECY IN GOVERNMENT

Cambridge, Mass.: The following is the text of the PRESS AND THE PEOPLE program which was telecast nationally January 8, 1959 over 45 educational and commercial stations. Moderator of the program was Louis Lyons, Curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism. Guests were Clark Mollenhoff, Pulitzer Prize winning Washington correspondent of the Cowles Publications, and Edwin A. Lahey, Chief of Bureau of the Knight Newspapers. The subject is "Secrecy in Government."

VOICE:

Today and every day the American people must make decisions on which their whole survival may depend. To make sound decisions the people must be informed. For this they depend on the nation's free press. How well is the nation's press doing its essential job? The people have a right to know the truth. They have a responsibility to ask.

ECHO:

The right to question.

MAN:

The public has a right to know, but the practical question is this: How much is the public entitled to know? Not everything. We respect, or we ought to respect individual rights of privacy. In fact, you and I might want to respect privacy a little more than some newspaperman in places like Hollywood and New York. We believe in secrecy of the ballot, secrecy in the jury room, secrecy about the most serious aspects of our military defenses. But the other side of the coin is that government like ours leans heavily on a well informed and intelligent public. Free government and free information are synonymous. And there is a breed of public official around in our smallest towns, as well as our biggest government agencies, that likes to operate behind closed doors.

How do we open those doors? Mr. Louis Lyons, that's a question for you and your guests on this program.

MR. LYONS:

Our guests are two nationally known names in journalism, a pair of mid-West newspapermen. One, the recipient of many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting last year, is the Washington correspondent of the Cowles publications, the Des Moines Register and Tribune, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, and Look magazine, Mr. Clark Mollenhoff.

VOICE:

Mr. Mollenhoff says, and I quote:

Our federal administration is practicing a doctrine of secrecy which carries in it seeds of dictatorship. The press must destroy this doctrine of secrecy before it can be used to wreck our system of free government.

MR. LYONS:

Our other guest is the Chief of the Washington Bureau of the Knight Newspapers, that is, the Chicago Daily News, the Detroit Free Press, the Miami Herald, the Charlotte Observer, and the Akron Beacon-Journal, Mr. Edwin Lahey.

VOICE:

Mr. Lahey has said:

A good reporter is a natural enemy of the public official. The reporter tries to get the news; the bureaucrat tries to conceal it.

MR. LYONS:

Secrecy in government. A challenge to reporters; and two reporters who are trying to do something about it. We'll talk to them in just a moment.

VOICE:

The Press and the People.

As moderator from Harvard University, the winner of the Peabody Award for television and radio journalism and the Lauterbach Award for outstanding contribution in the field of civil liberties, Mr. Louis Lyons.

MR. LYONS:

Mr. Mollenhoff, you are quoted as taking a very serious view of the extent of government secrecy. Will you explain this and tell us too what the press is trying to do about it?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Mr. Lyons, the press is doing a lot about many problems, but it isn't doing enough about some of the major problems, mainly because I don't believe that members of the press realize the full problem of executive department secrecy today.

Now, my statement that there is a threat of a dictatorship is not just my own opinion on this. Senator

Hennings of Missouri has stated this, in some official reports from his committee. Representative Moss has also stated this in reports from his committee. And I think it is significant that a Republican, George Meader of Michigan, has also made this charge relative to precedents set down by this administration. In brief it merely is that the executive department is taking the position that it has a right to tell the press and public and Congress just what it wants to, and there is no right, even on the part of Congress, to find out how laws are being administered, how money is being spent.

MR. LYONS:

Thank you. We want to ask some more about that.

And, Mr. Lahey, you have been quoted as saying the public official and the reporters are natural enemies. What about this?

MR. LAHEY:

Mr. Lyons, my statement without qualification sounds a little pretentious. Some of my best friends are public payrollers. But I do think that government officials have a presumptuousness that shows in a proprietary attitude toward their jobs, in which they think papa knows best, and which puts them in a position of always needing some exposure in the public interest.

On the other hand public officials might take the same position about the press being a natural enemy of them, because their lives are harried by needle nose reporters, I'm sure. As a matter of fact —

MR. LYONS:

A needle nose reporter is the kind of reporter who gets the news?

MR. LAHEY:

That's right. I remember an old buddy in Chicago years ago who came to an untimely end, Big Tim Murphy, a labor racketeer. He never liked reporters, and he used to say give any punk \$25 a week and a pencil and no man's reputation is safe.

MR. LYONS:

Do you find City Hall very different from Washington in respect to public officials in their attitude toward the press?

MR. LAHEY:

Basically not, except that the pressure of the press in City Hall can be applied better than in Washington. Washington is just too big to cope with. You can put heat on in the City Hall that is diffused in Washington.

MAN:

Mr. Mollenhoff, can you be specific about some of these stories that the public doesn't get out of Washington?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, there's the situation of Sherman Adams, Goldfine — actually Sherman Adams' influence with many of the regulatory agencies and around in other agencies of government. This has taken place over the period of the last four or five years, and Mr. Sherman Adams has taken the position that he has been covered by some executive secrecy, that his acts are somehow the acts of the President, and that even when he is contacting an agency for his friend Goldfine, these are outside of the scope of what a reporter can find out, outside the scope of what Congressional committees can find out.

And on this score I think that the Congressional committees are really one of our best safeguards to democracy. I don't agree with what they do on many occasions, but if they can use their subpoena to get into these agencies, we can usually get the material and put it out to the public.

MR. LAHEY:

Well, Mr. Mollenhoff, before you start making executive agencies the bad guys and the Congressmen the good guys in this drama, let me point out that you have a very tough time finding out from either Congressmen or the executive agencies what Congressional wives and dependents have been carried for free on European trips and how much counterpart funds is taken from the U. S. Embassy in Paris and spent cabaret-ing. You'll never find a Congressman to tell you that.

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, Mr. Lahey, I happen to agree with you on the problem of getting information from Congress in a few ways, but I think from our standpoint that we have to be on the side of Congress.

MR. LYONS:

Because they are on your side in this you mean?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Because they happen to be on our side, and because they are bipartisan.

MR. LYONS:

I'm thinking of the Committee of Congressman Moss that's been trying to break down secrecy. How far have they got with this?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, the Moss Committee has really made the record and they've made a very substantial record. They have pointed out that this doctrine of executive secrecy has absolutely no foundation in law, it has no foundation in any court decisions, and yet here is a philosophy of secrecy that is being foisted off on the public by President Eisenhower personally and by Attorney General Brownell and now Rogers. And the press up to this point has not exhibited the fear that it should for this because if they can take our laws, passed by Congress

from one end of Pennsylvania Avenue down to the other end, administer them as they please, spend the money as they please, you have executive dictatorship. And there's no kidding about it.

MR. LAHEY:

Has the Moss Committee ever told the Panama Canal Company to make public the names of the free-loading Congressmen who go on the Panama Canal liners every year, on the 12-day tropical cruise?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

I'm not going to be put in a position, Mr. Lahey, of defending everything that the Moss Committee or any other committee does. I will say this, the Moss Committee has moved against executive secrecy and as far as the Moss Committee is concerned, it has had an open operation. Now, I agree with you completely on these Panama junkets. I think it should be on the line, but I think every newspaper in this country should be raising a fuss, not only about Congress and the Panama junkets, but about executive secrecy. And somehow the executive secrecy business has failed to catch the imagination.

You can talk about junkets and people can understand this, but the executive secrecy is a real, basic threat to our democracy, and few people understand it, even when there is no law supporting it.

MR. LYONS:

Mr. Lahey, you have been digging out news from government agencies for a long time. Where do you find the toughest spots, what are some of the things you have to work hardest on in this?

MR. LAHEY:

Oh, well, the toughest spots, I would say, are the largest ones. Defense, for example, is such a big organization. They spend — they are responsible for spending 10 per cent for our whole national output over in that Pentagon.* There are so many bureaus that you never heard about that they can give you the run-around without actually imposing censorship.

MR. LYONS:

It seems to me the last time I saw you, you were worrying about trying to get the facts on our foreign military assistance.

MR. LAHEY:

This will go on forever. The Defense Department says that they don't object, for example, to a country-by-country breakdown of foreign military assistance. So you call the State Department. They say that they cannot give a country-by-country figure for military assistance. So you say, "Well, who said you can't?"

Then you go from one payroller to another to find

*By "whole national output." Mr. Lahey refers to gross national product. (Ed. note)

out who made the administrative determination that this would not be revealed to the public. And I defy anybody to finally put somebody in a corner who will say, "I made the determination." You just cannot find it. There are ten thousand people you have to talk to and you finally get worn down. It's like getting bitten to death by a duck, to find out a thing like that.

MR. LYONS:

Well, Mr. Mollenhoff, both of you gentlemen get around all over Washington. Now what about press conferences as channels of information? The President's press conference, for instance. How much use is that to you?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, I think that the Presidential press conference is very beneficial. It is the only point where you can call to the President's attention frequently things that are going on in the administration, and at least find out whether he will take a position or not.

MR. LAHEY:

Do you know what he says at a press conference?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, I don't always know what he says.

MR. LAHEY:

I get an inferiority complex there.

MR. LYONS:

Some of us know what Mr. Mollenhoff has said at some. I think of the Ladejinsky case.

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, that represents, Mr. Lyons —

MR. LYONS:

I think you might almost have said, as the Duke of Wellington said of Waterloo, "It was a near thing, and if I hadn't been there, it might not have come out that way."

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, Mr. Lyons, that demonstrates in a respect the necessity of having a Presidential press conference. In that particular case —

MR. LYONS:

I think you brought this case up in three different press conferences —

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Absolutely.

all egghead papers. We have to compress a vast problem into six or seven hundred words.

MR. LYONS:

And you are known as a past master of that. Let me ask Mr. Mollenhoff, to what extent do the conventions of what is news get in the way of the reporting we might get? Does the reporter feel he has to wait for what he calls a news peg or news break?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, I don't think we have to wait for it, but there is too much of a tendency to wait for the news break. There are many excellent stories that do just the job that Mr. Lahey was speaking about, in dramatizing the basic problem that may be buried in hearings, maybe buried in one hearing or a dozen hearings, but they don't get out in the proper way, because the day that the story broke originally, something else overshadowed it. A big story like the sending up of a satellite might have overshadowed a very important dramatic event. We should go back under those circumstances and recap on it.

MR. LYONS:

Well, let me ask both of you gentlemen, you work for great newspapers and for more than one newspaper. Now, to what extent do the people who run the newspaper, the publishers and the editors, encourage and stimulate men to do the kind of digging work for which you are both noted? How much of this goes on?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

As far as I am concerned, I think I have pretty much freedom in where I want to go and what I want to cover. I know in some smaller bureaus there are problems in Washington in that frequently they have one or two correspondents, and they will want one correspondent to cover the White House and have a by-line for prestige purposes, and somebody else to be 15 minutes ahead on routine news. And under these circumstances a reporter cannot do a digging job. I think in that way they stand in the way of good reporting.

MR. LYONS:

Well, Mr. Lahey, what do you say as to what you see of newspaper work in terms of your own standards and judgments of what you'd like to see done in Washington?

MR. LAHEY:

I don't have any sharp criticism, understanding the difficulty of it. Things happen too fast in our age. It is hard to adjust yourself to a big event that's gone before you have time to interpret it. Now, the reporter might decide that this is worth interpretation for tomorrow and maybe he's knocked out of the box by another big story. It's a day-by-day difficulty.

MR. LYONS:

Something else got the front page and washed out yesterday's interests?

MR. LAHEY:

Yes. Yes, it's a question of space. Critics of the newspaper, of whom there are approximately 175 million in this country, always forget the basic fact that the newspaper is a business institution, and the freedom of the press is founded on the necessity of being solvent. There's no more important objective to a newspaper than being solvent.

MR. LYONS:

I thought you were going to say, and I think you might well say, that the newspaper's job, that is, that the reporter's job is an impossible job with all the complexities, let alone secrecy and censorship.

MR. LAHEY:

That is right.

MR. LYONS:

And yet you fellows are tackling it.

MR. LAHEY:

At any given moment, in a local room, a state, capital bureau—or a Washington bureau, or a foreign bureau—at any given moment of any given day there is more to do than it is humanly possible to do. I have never had a day in Washington when that was not true.

MR. LYONS:

So, Mr. Lahey —

MR. LAHEY:

This is —

MR. LYONS:

You've got to take the strategic story, you've got to be selective —

MR. LAHEY:

Right.

MR. LYONS:

—and strike for the jugular, as I've heard you say.

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Mr. Lahey, I don't think we should present this as an impossible job. We can never tell everything that's going on in government. But we can point up the basic problems, and it's this problem on regulatory agencies. Most of us were aware of this problem in some degree or other over the period of the last four or five years. But it took the Goldfine-Adams case to dramatize this, so

that people all over the country could understand that it is not right for someone sitting in the White House, whether Sherman Adams or at a lower echelon, to reach out into these regulatory agencies, quasi-judicial bodies, and determine what happens.

MR. LAHEY:

Keeping in mind, old boy, at all times that you cannot bore the reader for very long and stay in business.

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

Well, I say you don't have to bore them. I say we hit the basic point, we dramatize it —

MR. LAHEY:

You wake him up.

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

— then we can leave it.

MAN:

Mr. Mollenhoff, I would like to ask you this wrap-up question. You've spoken about barriers created by government and the difficulties of covering Washington. Now, what is the real problem here? Is it secrecy or is it lack of enterprise by the press?

MR. MOLLENHOFF:

It represents a little bit of both. There are too few reporters who will dig into things, there are too few who are actually free to dig into things. In addition to this, those who do dig into things, frequently find themselves in the position where it is a backbreaking task to go from door to door in an agency to get a story. And investigative reporting is the most tiring thing that there is.

MR. LYONS:

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Well, one answer to official secrecy is aggressive reporting. Perhaps it is the only one. When any department of government can veil with secrecy anything it wants to hide, then we must rely on the can opener capacities of our Ed Laheys and Clark Mollenhoffs.

The public interest depends, indeed, on the vigor and the shrewdness, the courage and the independence of such. Of course there are never enough such men in any business. But we have hundreds of correspondents in Washington. And this really brings us, I think, to the question whether the press is organized to do all the digging that we, the public, need. If the problem of the press is government secrecy, then why parade a regiment of correspondents at every formal press conference and unleash only a handful to explore the thickets where the news may be hidden? We certainly need more than a handful for this toughest job. And if the government is going to act to the press like Batista, maybe the press should take a leaf from Castro's guerrilla tactics.

Now, the kind of news that our Mollenhoffs and

Laheys dig for is nothing trivial. From Teapot Dome down to the Teamsters corruption of public officials, the initiative of exposure has repeatedly come from hard-digging reporters. Without their penetrating reporting, the press could easily lapse into nothing much but an official gazette for what officials were willing to publish.

An open society is certainly the only free society, and it will only be secure to us if the press is in hands the people can trust. That is, those who leave the Laheys and the Mollenhoffs to follow their leads, who will publish their findings, and who will deploy enough reporters of such capacities to do the whole job.

Only such a press certainly is adequate as the guardian of all of our liberties.

Columbia, Missouri
January, 1959

